



Date and Time: Friday, August 18, 2023 11:39:00AM PDT

Job Number: 203873077

Document (1)

1. [*Canada needs a national public transportation system - here's why*](#)

Client/Matter: -None-

Search Terms: "climate justice"

Search Type: Natural Language

Narrowed by:

Content Type
News

Narrowed by

Language: English; Sources: National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post)(Canada); All Content Types: News; Geography by Document: North America; Geography by Document: Canada

Canada needs a national public transportation system - here's why

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

June 17, 2021 Thursday

Web Edition

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Section: PMN NEWS

Length: 1337 words

Body

THE CONVERSATION

This article was originally published on The Conversation, an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. Disclosure information is available on the original site.

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A major transit gap was created when Greyhound Lines stopped providing intercity bus services in Central Canada in May. Greyhound had previously withdrawn from Western provinces in 2018 following a decrease in ridership. This time, the company cited financial pressure related to COVID-19 for ending service on the rest of its Canadian routes.

Greyhound's exit illustrates the need for a publicly funded national transit system.

The federal government's recently announced \$15 billion in

transport funding is a step in the right direction. However, such announcements do not necessarily lead to improvements in public transportation because provincial governments have the final decision.

In 2018, when the federal government provided funding to fill gaps created by Greyhound's initial cuts, some provinces refused it.

Many communities in Canada currently lack intercity and regional transportation and are "under-served with intermittent, expensive and sometimes unsafe transportation options." Federal, provincial and Indigenous governments therefore need to collaborate to develop an integrated national public transportation system that is safe, equitable, climate friendly and accessible - especially for rural, vulnerable and racialized communities.

An integrated national public transportation system could be designed to improve connectedness between communities and to needed services - including health care, education, financial services, government programs and food retail. It would promote environmental justice, health equity, human dignity and mobility rights.

Our research looks at how governments' political choices influence these social determinants of health and health outcomes. We have focused on how budget cuts to public transportation worsen health outcomes. This Saskatchewan-based research shows that public transportation cuts can be especially detrimental to vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, seniors and people with low incomes.

Canada needs a national public transportation system - here's why

A new study called Here Today, Gone Tomorrow will look at vulnerabilities linked to the absence or presence of public transportation in rural and remote locations.

Why public transportation?

Transportation affects health because of its connections to service access and climate change.

Globally, 1.5 million people die from road transport - more than from HIV, malaria or tuberculosis. Canada had the fourth highest rate of traffic fatalities in 2009 among OECD countries. The most recent data shows that road traffic fatality in Canada continues to be higher (5.2 per 100,000 inhabitants) than the European Union average (4.9 per 100,000 inhabitants).

Investment in public transportation would reduce these deaths. A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States found that while 76.6 per cent of traffic fatalities were people in private cars, only 0.1 per cent were bus occupants.

Public transportation can reduce poverty while ensuring health-care access. A 2019 study found that almost one million urban Canadians are at risk of "transportation poverty" because lack of reliable public transportation separates people from economic opportunities.

Our own research on the dismantling of the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC) revealed reduced health-care access and increased waste within the health system because hospitals had relied on the public bus network to transport equipment, blood samples and medicines. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the large-scale dismantling of public transportation options has left many communities stranded.

Public transportation is a future-facing, climate friendly option. Transportation accounts for 28 per cent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions - higher than the global rate of 23 per cent. This contributes to the effects of global climate change, which disproportionately impact those who are poor. As a solution to the climate crisis, public transportation is far more feasible than other suggested approaches like electric cars.

Lack of public transit affects vulnerable people

Apart from the reasons above, a national public transportation system is necessary because its absence normalizes the oppression of already disadvantaged groups. In Western Canada, the tragedy of the highway of tears offers a cautionary tale.

Between 1969 and 2011 an estimated 40 women, mostly Indigenous, disappeared or were murdered on Highway 16 in northern British Columbia. The national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls concluded that "lack of supportive infrastructure and transportation" has played a role in exposing Indigenous women to danger and violence.

Absence of public transportation also disproportionately affects people with disabilities. People with disabilities, seniors, low-income residents and other vulnerable groups constituted over 70 per cent of Saskatchewan Transportation Company's ridership. Consequently, dismantling the STC disproportionately affected these groups.

Although a patchwork of private providers emerged after the STC closure, accidents were reported and services were not accessible to people with disabilities. It took a complaint by a former STC rider to the Canadian Transportation Association and two years of back-and-forth for a ruling to be made that private bus service providers must be accessible to all.

Such outcomes illustrate the need for an integrated national public transport system in Canada.

Re-imagining the way forward

Canada needs a national public transportation system - here's why

Although national public transportation is being taken seriously in some parts of the world, public transportation is often targeted by austerity-driven government cutbacks. In Canada, deregulation made intercity transportation a provincial jurisdiction in 1987, which led to public transportation cuts.

Current concerns for *climate justice*, reduction of social inequalities, accessibility and mobility rights call for an integrated transportation system linking communities and services throughout Canada. Treating transportation as an essential service and mobility as a human right would go far in eliminating existing inequalities.

In re-imagining future solutions, Canada should pay special attention to the social dimensions of transportation, including its impact on women, the poor, people with disabilities, the elderly and Indigenous and racialized people.

Canada needs a national, publicly funded system integrated across provinces and informed by social, environmental, economic, health and accessibility concerns. Although countries like Estonia or Luxemburg differ from Canada in contexts such as size, their national public transportation networks can provide examples.

Such a radical vision may only be possible if transportation again becomes regulated in Canada.

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Cindy Hanson receives funding from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for a Knowledge Synthesis Grant on mobility and public transportation in rural and remote Canada.

Jacob Albin Korem Alhassan and Lori Hanson do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (90%); EPIDEMIOLOGY (89%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (89%); INFECTIOUS DISEASE (89%); PUBLIC HEALTH (89%); RESEARCH REPORTS (89%); TRAFFIC FATALITIES (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); DEATH & DYING (87%); ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (78%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); HEALTH EQUITY (78%); HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCE (78%); SOCIOLOGY (78%); WRITERS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (77%); COMMUNITY HEALTH PROGRAMS (77%); ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (77%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (77%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (77%); TRANSIT AUTHORITIES (77%); CLIMATOLOGY (76%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (75%); TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS (75%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (72%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (72%); MALARIA (72%); VULNERABLE HEALTH POPULATIONS (70%); VULNERABLE ADULTS (69%); DISEASES & DISORDERS (68%); DISABLED PERSONS (64%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (64%); EUROPEAN UNION (62%); ACCIDENTAL FATALITIES (60%); TUBERCULOSIS (60%); LOW INCOME PERSONS (50%);

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conversation,article,originally,published,independent,nonprofit !@PERMALINK=

<https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmn/canada-needs-a-national-public-transportation-system-heres-why> (%)

Industry: INTERURBAN BUS TRANSPORTATION (90%); MOTORCOACHES & BUSES (90%); PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION (90%); TRANSPORTATION & WAREHOUSING (90%); EPIDEMIOLOGY (89%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (89%); TRAFFIC FATALITIES (89%); BUDGETS (78%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); HEALTH EQUITY (78%); WRITERS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (77%); TRANSIT AUTHORITIES (77%); TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS (75%); RETAIL & WHOLESALE TRADE (74%); BANKING & FINANCE (73%); BUDGET CUTS (66%)

Geographic: REGINA, SK, CANADA (79%); SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA (93%); CANADA (96%); UNITED STATES (79%); EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES (50%)

Load-Date: June 17, 2021

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